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Study on the Lingnan Culture of Chinese Caribbean in *Pao* from the Spatial Perspective of Creolization

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Abstract: From the spatial perspective of Creolization, this paper explores the inheritance and reconstruction of Lingnan cultural elements in the Caribbean context in Pao, a novel by the Chinese-Jamaican writer Kerry Yang. Focusing on three dimensions-culinary culture, martial arts practice, and community ethics-it offers a close analysis of how Lingnan culture achieves creative transformation through encounters with diverse cultures and develops into an evolving creolized cultural practice. This process constructs a micro-space for identity negotiation and power interaction within the Chinese Caribbean community. The paper argues that Lingnan culture in the novel is not a static relic of nostalgia, but a relational network dynamically generated within the distinctive context of the Caribbean islands. Culinary techniques are deeply embedded with local ingredients, traditional martial arts are integrated with the survival codes of Jamaican streets, and community ethics transcend clan boundaries toward cross-racial solidarity. Creolization thus functions not only as a survival strategy for the Chinese diaspora to maintain their cultural roots, but also as a vital pathway to break rigid racial boundaries and construct a multifaceted identity.

Keywords: *Pao*, the spatial perspective of Creolization, Lingnan culture, Chinese Caribbean, identity.

1. Introduction

In the mid-nineteenth century, after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, large numbers of indentured laborers from southern China, including the Lingnan region and many Hakka communities, were transported to Caribbean islands such as Jamaica, marking the beginning of Chinese settlement in the Caribbean. As Benítez-Rojo observed, the Caribbean is a "cultural sea without boundary or center" ([1]: p. 270), yet this sea carries a migration history marked by blood, sweat, and exploitation. The history of the Chinese in Jamaica is, in one sense, "a story within a story" ([2]: p. 1): "It is the violence of first colonial, then neo-colonial and American imperial projects" ([3]: p. 1). When their indenture contracts expired, most of these laborers did not return to China. Drawing on the perseverance and business wisdom rooted in Lingnan culture, they struggled to survive between white colonizers and Black locals, gradually developing into an important merchant class in Jamaican society. It is against this vast and complicated historical background that Kerry Young, a Chinese-Jamaican writer, sets her representative novel Pao. Told in the first person, the novel narrates the legendary story of Pao, who travels from Guangzhou to Jamaica with his mother and eventually grows into a community leader in Kingston's Chinatown. It vividly portrays Jamaica's turbulent political transformations and shows how the Chinese community represented by Pao preserves, develops, and reconstructs elements of its original culture in a foreign land.

In recent years, with the rise of diaspora literature studies and postcolonial criticism, Chinese-Caribbean literature has gradually gained academic attention. Existing studies on Pao and the living conditions of Chinese-Caribbean people have mostly focused on broad political contexts and issues of identity. Scholars examine how Jamaica's turbulent history affects Chinese communities. Kristine A. Wilson, for example, reveals that after Jamaican independence, hidden forms of neocolonialism replaced earlier British rule and intensified the hardships of ordinary people ([4]: pp. 3-12). Through a reading of Pao, Dennis M. Hogan argues that Chinese immigrants undergo deep cultural creolization during Jamaica's nation-building process. He emphasizes that modern Jamaican national identity is shaped by multiple ethnic groups and that the novel breaks with traditional binary narratives by highlighting the cultural resilience of minority communities and their capacity to build cross-racial connections amid violence and unrest ([5]: pp. 11-14). Anne-Marie Lee-Loy further suggests that "Chineseness" in the Caribbean has moved beyond simple nationality or bloodline and has become a fluid identity embedded in local social changes, thereby challenging the stereotype of the Chinese as perpetual outsiders ([6]: pp. 1-4). Su Ping's overview of Chinese-Caribbean literary history in China reinforces this line of interpretation. She argues that "the core of contemporary Caribbean literature is the reconstruction of cultural subjectivity in a multicultural context" ([7]: pp. 108-114) and praises Pao for "effectively easing tensions between Chinese and other ethnic groups" ([7]: p. 103). Yet these studies tend to analyze identity politics at a macro level and offer relatively little systematic explanation of the deeper geo-cultural logic behind identity formation in Chinese-Caribbean writing. Although many critics acknowledge the close relation between Chinese-Caribbean subjectivity and Lingnan culture, this important connection is often reduced to background information. As a result, it remains difficult to understand fully how Lingnan culture survives dynamically overseas and becomes a deep source of support for Chinese identity.

In fact, the survival of Chinese people in the Caribbean cannot be understood either as the simple reproduction of an original Lingnan culture or as passive assimilation into the host culture. Rather, that culture is creatively transformed through sustained multicultural interaction. In Édouard Glissant's Poetics of Relation, the Caribbean appears as an endless "whirlpool," a dynamic space where different cultures clash and blend amid historical waves ([8]: p. 6). Glissant

removes literature from the logic of a single root and situates it within a dense network of cultural relations. Through overlapping, hybridity, and cross-cultural connections, he creates a tense yet generative space of creolization. As Zhang Xuefeng has noted, creolization no longer refers merely to superficial racial mixture or linguistic patchwork, but to the creative re-formation of the self through the mutual penetration of diverse cultures. It is an open-ended process of cultural interaction and renewal that embraces the beauty of hybridity ([9]: p. 129). Within the complex historical context of the Caribbean, Chinese communities have long been situated between white colonial hegemony and African-descended local social structures. In Pao, Kingston's Chinatown and its surrounding neighborhoods form a typical creolized space where physical boundaries and psychological constructions intersect. In such a space, Chinese immigrants are no longer silent marginal subjects. Through the selective transformation of their native Lingnan culture and the creative acceptance of Jamaican culture, they develop a new cultural form that cannot be simply classified. Supported by the fluidity and inclusiveness of this creolized space, the Chinese community acquires opportunities to speak against cultural hegemony and turns marginality into an active field for rebuilding social relations and reconfiguring culture.

Based on the above theoretical framework, this paper explores the cross-contextual transformation and reconstruction of Lingnan cultural elements in Pao. It argues that Lingnan traditions represented in the novel are not rigid cultural relics, but forms that undergo creative development as they move across contexts. The dietary customs, southern Chinese martial arts, and community ethics depicted in the novel are concrete expressions of this reconstruction, forming the real foundation of the creolized social space. The evolution of these ordinary cultural practices offers a microcosm of how Chinese communities negotiate power with Jamaican local culture and colonial structures. In this way, the creolized space becomes a field that challenges binary hegemonies. Ultimately, the hybrid cultural practice enables Chinese immigrants represented by Pao to break through fixed racial labels and shape a diverse, fluid, and hybrid identity. This, in turn, demonstrates the interpretive value of the spatial perspective of creolization in understanding identity construction among diasporic subjects.

2. Food Culture: The Hybrid Reconstruction of Lingnan Taste Memory

In Chinese-Caribbean literature, food is far more than a material necessity. It is a crucial symbol that carries memories of the homeland and represents cultural identity. As the historian Barry Higman remarks: "Food is not just essential to bodily survival but vital as a driver of culture and identity" ([10]: p. 1). For the Chinese immigrants in Pao, Lingnan food crosses the ocean with them and becomes a significant anchor for their identity. However, these taste memories are sealed off from their surroundings or preserved in unchanged form. Within Jamaica's creolized space, they undergo profound transformations that combine continuity with innovation.

When early Chinese immigrants confronted the completely new natural and social environment of the Caribbean, attachment to inherited foodways became one of the first means through which they resisted cultural marginalization and maintained collective identity. In the novel, traditional Lingnan preserved foods such as "preserved salted fish" ([11]: p. 22) and "char siu" ([11]: p. 28) appear repeatedly. As material reminders of home, these foods offer Pao and his mother a sense of psychological security and cultural continuity. They also testify to the practical techniques of preservation associated with Lingnan food culture. Their durability reflects the resilience and pragmatism that sustained Chinese laborers through the hardships of early immigrant life. Significantly, these foods do not remain confined to the private space of the Chinese household. At home, preserved foods function as intimate family tastes. On the streets of Kingston, they are sold in Chinese shops and enter the daily lives of local people. This change from the private to the public blurs the boundary between domestic life and public space and suggests that Chinese immigrants are embedding their culinary culture deeply within Jamaican everyday life through commercial networks.

At the same time, the condition of diaspora makes it impossible to simply reproduce homeland culture unchanged. Distance and scarcity require Lingnan cuisine in Jamaica to be locally reconstructed. This process is not passive assimilation but active and creative adaptation. Pao's mother, Ma, originally wants to cook the traditional Lingnan dish "duck and orange". But she cannot obtain key ingredients, especially the Chinese cooking wine needed to remove the strong smell of the meat. Rather than abandoning the dish, she creatively changes it into "chicken and orange juice" ([11]: p. 39). By using local tropical ingredients to revise Lingnan culinary rules, she clearly enacts a form of cultural hybridity within a creolized space. She also adds local Caribbean ingredients such as "Irish potatoes and butter beans" ([11]: p. 39) to traditional Chinese pork dishes, breaking the original boundaries of Lingnan cuisine. In this sense, Ma's kitchen becomes a miniature creolized space. Within it, Chinese traditions carried by food are "claimed, adapted, and modified to facilitate integration" ([12]: p. 45). Lingnan cooking methods and Jamaican local materials merge to create a new Chinese-Caribbean taste that is neither fully Chinese nor fully Jamaican.

If Ma's kitchen is a site of everyday cultural exchange, then banquets in Chinatown function as a cultural fortress that protects the community. To welcome Pao, his mother and his brother, the local Chinese hold a feast with traditional Lingnan poon choi. The novel carefully describes how "meat and vegetables were brought in on a wooden tray carried by two men" ([11]: p. 22). In a Jamaican environment shaped by racial discrimination and colonial oppression, Chinese immigrants share familiar home-style foods such as "white cut chicken, roast duck, pak choi, choi sum, and wonton noodles" ([11]: p. 22). Through shared tastes, they create a relatively protected communal space. As a vital symbol of Lingnan clan culture, the collective consumption of poon choi is more than an act of eating. It embodies shared ethics and collective identity. The feast becomes a social ceremony that consolidates the community, reinforces kinship and regional ties, and forms an internal defense against the pressures of the dominant order.

Within creolized space, hybrid food practices also allow Chinese immigrants to break class boundaries and rebuild social relations. Pao's attempt at upward mobility offers a clear example. In order to marry Fay Wong, the daughter of the wealthy Chinese-Jamaican businessman Henry Wong, Pao wisely uses food as a cultural key to the upper class. When dealing with his westernized, affluent future

mother-in-law, Miss Ciceley, he brings her gifts of "chocolates and grapenut ice cream" ([11]: p. 12), foods that correspond to upper-class Western taste. He also regularly joins her for British-style afternoon tea. At these occasions, colonial foods appear repeatedly: "Earl Grey tea, tin salmon, cucumber sandwiches, and Victoria sponge cake" ([11]: p. 12). These delicate, fancy foods form a sharp contrast with preserved salted fish, which represents the taste of poorer working-class Chinese in Chinatown. The contrast exposes not only class divisions within the Chinese-Caribbean community but also differing degrees of westernization. At the same time, it reveals Pao's flexibility as a social actor. By manipulating food as a social code, he turns culinary performance into a ladder of mobility and reconstructs his social position between the margins and the mainstream.

In addition, hybrid food practice also helps dissolve the racial divide between Chinese and Black Jamaicans. In Pao's relationship with Gloria, a Black Jamaican woman, sharing food slowly removes ethnic barriers between them. To celebrate Pao's sister Marcia's discharge from hospital, Gloria prepares traditional Jamaican dishes: "stew chicken and rice and peas, coleslaw, and cho-cho" ([11]: p. 4). Yet even this apparently local meal carries traces of intercultural exchange, as Lingnan slow-cooking skills intersect with Jamaican national dishes. The dining table becomes a site of emotional connection across race and class. This connection extends into the daily practice of tea-drinking. As Pao says: "All I am doing there is drinking tea with Gloria. I am sipping Lipton's Yellow Label at ten o' clock at night. And I am talking about god knows what" ([11]: p. 5). Unlike the fancy afternoon teas of the upper class, this inexpensive, popular Lipton tea carries a very different soical meaning. It evokes a shared life between Chinese and Black people at the lower levels of society and signals Pao's growing attachment to the land and its people. The recurring image of Pao and Gloria sharing food and tea becomes a lively metaphor for the reduction of cultural distance and the formation of cross-racial relationships within creolized space.

3. Martial Arts Culture: The Transcontextual Evolution of Lingnan Martial Spirit

If the hybrid practice of food forms the material foundation and emotional comfort for Chinese Caribbean people in a foreign land, Lingnan martial arts build their body politics and spiritual defense against external violence and help them establish a stronger subjectivity. In Pao, Lingnan martial arts are not presented as an exotic cultural spectacle designed for curiosity. Instead, they participate deeply in Jamaica's complex racial conflicts and class struggles. In particular, the philosophical ideas embedded in martial arts provide an excellent way of understanding the changing identity of Chinese immigrants. As Adam Frank argues in his discussion of martial arts and yin-yang philosophy: "If we see the self as yin and the other as yang, this allows us to understand identity as something temporary and changeable, an ongoing process of transformation" ([13]: p. 17). In creolized space, the transcontextual evolution of this traditional martial art with rich dialectical thinking shows how diasporic communities reach a dynamic balance between preserving their original cultural ethics and adapting to the harsh colonial environment. Through concrete physical practice, they rebuild micro power relations and fluid identities.

In the novel, Zhang, Pao's adoptive father, serves as the key disseminator of Lingnan martial arts. Every morning, he teaches tai chi to Pao and his brother. The novel describes this ceremonial physical practice in detail: "From the beginning-Grasp Bird's Tail, White Stork Cools Its Wings, Brush Knee and Twist Step, Carry Tiger to Mountain. To the end-Shoot Tiger with Bow, Strike, Parry, Punch, Apparent Close-up and Conclusion" ([11]: p. 24). This daily training involves much more than self-defense. It also passes down a set of cultural ethics rooted in traditional Chinese philosophy to the younger generation. Along with physical training comes strategic instruction. Zhang repeatedly tells Pao that he must study The Art of War so that the principles once "used for making war plan and conducting military operations" ([11]: p. 24) can be turned into practical wisdom for survival in a foreign country. This fusion of martial training and classical military strategy deeply shapes Pao's later behavior. When dealing with complex family and class relations, he perfectly follows the strategic spirit that "what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy and disrupt his alliances" ([11]: p. 86). In order to weaken the alliance between his wife Fay and her wealthy family and to stop her from repeatedly retreating to the big house on Lady Musgrave Road, which she treats as a "shelter" ([11]: p. 88), Pao does not resort to direct confrontation. Instead, he skillfully arranges for his highly westernized mother-in-law Miss Ciceley to "meet Queen Elizabeth during her visit" ([11]: p. 86). This action greatly satisfies Ciceley's class vanity and successfully wins her to his side. Without any direct conflict, Pao cuts off Fay's emotional support and re-establishes domestic authority. The episode vividly illustrates how traditional military strategy is translated into social struggles within Caribbean society.

Nevertheless, in a postcolonial context, any original cultural symbol must change dynamically when it enters a new living space and meets different cultures. Although Pao inherits the spirit of tai chi from his cultural background, martial arts practice quickly goes beyond the function of cultural protection. In Jamaica's complex racial environment, it becomes a tool of body politics that challenges colonial hegemony and breaks racial barriers. One of the most strained conflicts in the novel happens when Pao sees a black fruit vendor being bullied by a white colonizer. Confronted with the vendor's fear and helplessness under colonial violence, Pao steps forward. He combines the gentle, circular philosophy of tai chi with sudden, powerful real-combat action to strike back: "I get the strength for a roundhouse kick just like Zhang teach me. Then I punch to the throat with my forearm" ([11]: p. 33). Here, the core idea of tai chi—using the opponent's strength against him—goes beyond simple fighting skills. It becomes a powerful metaphor for postcolonial resistance, in which marginalized subjects use the arrogance and violence of hegemonic power to overturn domination itself. Even more strikingly, after knocking down the white man, Pao declares firmly: "I am not a Chink and these boys are not Niggers. We are Jamaicans. We are brothers" ([11]: p. 33). This shout completely tears apart the racial labels imposed by colonizers upon vulnerable ethnic groups. Through this victory in martial arts, Pao carves out an active creolized space within a social structure full of violence and oppression. He not only forges solidarity between Chinese and Black people, both marginalized and poor, but also establishes an identity grounded not in blood or skin color but in shared experience of survival and struggle.

Furthermore, the deep spirit of Lingnan martial arts also

appears in solving complex cross-racial conflicts. When dealing with the arson attack on Mr. Lee's shop in Chinatown, Zhang, as a leader of the Chinese community, embodies a martial ethics that combines strictness and mercy. After discovering that the arsonist is a Black man named McKenzie, Zhang first punishes him physically according to community rules: "Uncle go and drag McKenzie outta a bar, with McKenzie kicking and screaming…Uncle strip off McKenzie old shoes and tartan socks and hang him up by feet, his feet you get that, on a wooden scaffold Uncle put up there for the purpose" ([11]: p. 32). However, when the hidden truth comes to light, everything changes. McKenzie has set the fire only because "Mr. Lee would not let him talk to his daughter" ([11]: p. 32). The disaster is thus an unexpected outcome of blocked cross-racial love between two poor people. Zhang's response changes accordingly. He not only unties McKenzie but also carries him home and nurses him until he recovers fully. This shift reveals how martial ethics are transformed politically in a foreign context. On the surface, hanging McKenzie upside down protects the safety and order of the Chinese community. But in reality, the later kindness and care go beyond rigid racial separation and send a message of deep understanding and reconciliation to the Black community. At this point, traditional martial ethics exceed the logic of punitive violence and become a political medium for reducing ethnic hatred, rebuilding community justice, and restoring trust among the poor within creolized space. This episode deeply reveals the true meaning of tai chi and Lingnan martial arts: not the domination of the weak, but the use of force to stop violence and protect the vulnerable. This restrained, patient, and disciplined martial virtue forms a moral foundation for the Chinese community's early survival in Jamaica.

4. Community Ethics: The Adaptive Reconstruction of Lingnan Family Values

If food and martial arts provide the Chinese-Caribbean people with forms of physical defense in a foreign land, the family and community ethics from Lingnan culture are the core support for their spiritual fortress and social order. In Pao, traditional Lingnan clan ethics are deeply deconstructed and restructured within Jamaica's complex racial and class context. This ethical reconstruction is neither a total rejection of Chinese traditions nor a passive acceptance of colonial values. Instead, through the creolization of social relations, the novel redefines the identity boundaries of the Chinese community between preservation and adaptation.

When early diasporic communities confronted a hostile and uncertain host society, they often turned inward instinctively to seek ethical protection from their original culture. In the novel, the family-centered values and mutual support emphasized in Lingnan culture are fully preserved in Kingston's Chinatown. Uncle Zhang, the sworn brother of Pao's father, learns that his close friend "was shot dead by British and French troops in Shaki" ([11]: p. 51). Without hesitation, he unconditionally accepts Pao and his mother when they arrive from China. In order to keep his promise to his dead friend, he even asks Chen to let him run a "pao-ke-p'iao business" ([11]: p. 51) so that he can finance their journey to Jamaica. Zhang's actions vividly show the traditional Chinese values of promise-keeping and the protection of a deceased friend's family. In colonial times lacking modern systems of welfare or protection, such emotional bonds and ethical responsibilities rooted in sworn brotherhood and regional ties provide a safe shelter for newly arrived Chinese immigrants.

As Pao grows up, he always regards filial piety and respect for the elderly as strict moral principles. When his elder brother Xiuquan decides to leave for "a temporary farm job in the United States to support the wartime need" ([11]: p. 45), Pao acutely aware of his bond with his family and this land. He secretly promises himself that he will never leave Jamaica, declaring: "I was committed to her, for good or bad, rich or poor, in sickness and in health" ([11]: p. 48). Similarly, when his westernized wife Fay wants to move out of poor Matthews Lane and into a white middle-class district, Pao firmly refuses. He would rather risk his marriage than leave his elderly mother and Uncle Zhang. "Look at them. The two of them old. I am the son. They are my responsibility" ([11]: p. 64). This refusal is not simply attachment to their physical home but a strong rejection of Western individualism. It clearly shows the powerful cohesion of traditional Lingnan family ethics in resisting cultural assimilation. Furthermore, this community ethics goes beyond the family and becomes a communal performance in Uncle Zhang's funeral. Starting the night before, Chinese residents of Chinatown gather voluntarily and keep vigil throughout the night. During the ritual of washing the body, they "light candles and firecrackers and make holy water" ([11]: p. 190) to drive away evil spirits. On the way to the cemetery, people in front "scatter the road money to buy the goodwill of malicious spirits along the road" ([11]: p. 191). Through these detailed ritual descriptions, the novel momentarily suspends ordinary Jamaican time and produces, within foreign public space, a sacred field shaped by Lingnan cosmology. At the extremity of life and death, the diasporic community solemnly reaffirms its cultural roots in creolized space.

More importantly, Pao's way of governing Chinatown shows an open and dynamic communal ethics in creolized space. Living in Kingston's poor and complex communities, Pao acts as a hidden leader who carefully preserves order in Chinatown. When Samuels, an opportunist, "secretly sells guns for profit under the excuse of stopping violence" ([11]: p. 134), Pao intervenes immediately. He realizes that once guns circulate freely, community safety will become dependent on a violent order shaped by coercion, and mutual trust within Chinatown will collapse. However, when Samuels is killed and leaves behind a wife and four young children with no means of support, Pao shows mercy and care far beyond the boundaries of kinship and race. He voluntarily pays their "rent, school fees, Blue Cross medical insurance, and children's clothes" ([11]: p. 140). In doing so, he decentralizes and reconstructs the traditional Lingnan ethic of protecting the clan. He combines the broad spirit of traditional Chinese culture with the mutual support of poor Caribbean people. He breaks the narrow boundary of Chinese clan-based obligation and extends care to all oppressed people in Jamaica. In this dynamic creolized space, the Chinese community is no longer a closed, foreign enclave. Instead, through ethical bonds that cross ethnic boundaries, it connects its fate to that of other marginalized Jamaicans and becomes deeply implicated in the broader historical formation of modern Jamaica.

5. Conclusion

Kerry Young's Pao is far more than an immigrant story recording family memory. It is a micro-epic that deeply

depicts the construction of Chinese-Caribbean subjectivity. From the spatial perspective of the creolization, Lingnan culture, brought to the Caribbean by indentured laborers and immigrants, does not fade away in Jamaica's complex postcolonial worlds, nor does it remain a sealed relic of nostalgic. Instead, it demonstrates remarkable vitality and cultural flexibility.

From the hybridity of food at the material level, to the politics of martial arts at the physical level, to the expansion of ethics at the spiritual level, Pao and the Chinese community he represents successfully create an active creolized space in Jamaica, a foreign land full of power struggles. In kitchens and banquets, the mixing of traditional tastes with local ingredients breaks down rigid class and racial boundaries. On streets and in moments of conflict, tai chi and martial ethics become political strategies for resisting colonial violence and building cross-racial solidarity. In the management of survival crisis, traditional Lingnan community ethics break free from narrow blood ties and develop into a wider caring network that includes all oppressed subjects. These dynamic processes of cultural reconstruction show clearly that Chinese-Caribbean identity is not a zero-sum game between "Chineseness" and "Jamaicanness". Instead, with Lingnan culture as their spiritual foundation, Chinese immigrants continuously engage in cross-cultural communication and creative adaptation, rooting themselves deeply in the multicultural soil of the Caribbean.

Through creolization, the Chinese community not only gains dignity and a stable position within a society structured by black-white binaries, but also integrates itself into the building of modern Jamaican with a strong sense of cultural consciousness. Pao therefore offers, through the emotional power of literature, an imaginative response to the survival difficulties faced by diasporic subjects in the spirit of the Poetics of Relation. A study of Lingnan culture in creolized space not only broadens the critical horizon of Chinese-Caribbean literature and highlights the resilience and wisdom of minority communities in resisting cultural hegemony, but also provides a profound answer to the enduring diasporic question "Where is home" - an answer shaped by hybridity, relation, and a shared sense of destiny.

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